

LESSON 3. John Prepared the Way

MEMORY VERSE: “Behold, I will send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me.”
(Malachi 3:1)

THE TIME HAD COME

Israel (the Jews) had been in subjection to other nations for centuries. Though once a great nation themselves, they had turned to serving idols, and God allowed heathen nations to rule over them. Prophets had warned them over and over to repent, and turn back to serving the one true God. But the Jews were a stubborn and self-willed people who chose to follow their own desires rather than listen to God’s messengers. They knew that God had promised a “Messiah,” who would save them, but they mistakenly thought this was to be an earthly king who would sit on David’s throne, deliver them from the Romans and restore their once mighty nation.

As Daniel had foretold, the time for God to set up His everlasting kingdom came while the Jews were in bondage to the Romans (Daniel 2:31-45). “But when the fulness of time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons” (Galatians 4:4, 5). God had given the law of Moses to prepare the people, now it was time for a new law and a new Lawgiver.

GOD SENT A FORERUNNER TO PREPARE THE WAY

Malachi had prophesied that God would send a messenger to prepare the way for the coming of the Christ. This forerunner was John, whom the Scriptures refer to as “John the Baptist” (Matthew 3:1). John’s mother and Jesus’s mother were cousins. John was about six months older than Jesus and began preaching before Jesus. He urged the people to repent because “the kingdom of heaven is at hand [near]” (Matthew 3:2). People from all over Judea came to hear what John was saying about the coming Messiah, to confess their sins, and to be baptized by him in the Jordan River. Many thought John was the prophet Elijah who had risen from the grave, because Malachi had prophesied, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord” (Malachi 4:5). John fulfilled this when he came in the spirit of Elijah, and preached with the same zeal and self-denial as Elijah had done hundreds of years before.

John’s father was Zacharias, a priest. Before John was born, an angel told Zacharias that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a son, and they were to name him John. This was to be a special child, the angel said, who would turn the hearts of many back to the Lord. He would prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:13-17).

IT WAS A GREAT AND DREADFUL DAY

The coming of Jesus was indeed a great and notable day, not only for those in the first century, but for mankind of every generation. Though He was God’s Son, Jesus came to earth in human flesh, lived and faced temptations to sin just as all have done since the creation. Yet He remained

sinless and obedient to God. He willingly suffered and sacrificed His life on the cross to pay the price for the sins of all who hear and obey His gospel (Mark 10:45; Hebrews 5:9).

It was a dreadful day for all who refused to follow the Lord. John warned those who would not listen of the “wrath to come” (Matthew 3:7). Separated from God by their sins, they had no hope of salvation. On the day of judgment they will be like chaff (the husks or waste from the threshing of grain) that will be burned “with unquenchable fire” (Matthew 3:12). The same punishment awaits those today who refuse to heed God’s Word. Jesus also spoke of the pain and anguish of those who chose to follow the devil (Matthew 13:39-40; 21:44).

JOHN WAS A GREAT MESSENGER

Elijah had been a great prophet about 900 years before the birth of Jesus. He and Moses were chosen by God to appear with Jesus on the mount of transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-5). Yet, Jesus said of John, “Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Matthew 11:11). John’s work was as important as that of Moses, Elijah, David or any of the other great men of the Old Testament. Yet, John died before the church was established on the day of Pentecost, thus he was not in Christ’s kingdom here on earth, the church of Jesus Christ.

While John proclaimed the coming of the Savior, some wanted to know if he was that Savior, or perhaps even Elijah who had risen from the dead? He told the people he was neither, and that he was not even worthy to unloose the strings or latches on the shoes of the One who was to come (John 1:20-27). John, the apostle of Jesus, wrote that John the Baptist came as a witness “to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe” (John 1:7).

JESUS BAPTIZED BY JOHN

John was preaching and baptizing in the area of the Jordan River when Jesus went to him and asked John to baptize Him. At first John refused, saying that he needed to be baptized by Jesus. John knew Jesus was the Messiah and he did not feel qualified to baptize the Lord. John also knew it was he who was the sinner and not the Lamb of God. But Jesus persuaded John to baptize Him, saying, “Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15). If Jesus was baptized to fulfill “all righteousness,” then all who believe in Him today also need to fulfill all righteousness by being baptized for the remission of their sins (Acts 2:38; 22:16).

As Jesus came up out of the burial in water, the heavens were opened and God’s Spirit descended like a dove lighting upon Jesus. God spoke from heaven saying “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17).

JOHN DID HIS WORK

John was sent by God to prepare the way for Christ. John was zealous and plain-spoken in his preaching. He urged the people to repent from their lives of sin. He craved neither good food nor luxurious living, but sought to turn the people back to God. His stand for the truth would later cost

John his life as he condemned Herod and Herodias for their adulterous marriage. Herod had John beheaded to please Herodias and her daughter (Mark 6:17-28). Obeying God may bring worldly persecution, but its reward is eternal life in heaven.

QUESTIONS

TRUE OR FALSE

- _____ 1. God chose John (the Baptist) to prepare the way for the coming of Christ.
- _____ 2. John was actually Elijah who had risen from the dead.
- _____ 3. John was baptized by Jesus.
- _____ 4. Multitudes of people heard John preaching and repented, but refused to be baptized..
- _____ 5. God spoke from heaven when Jesus was baptized.
- _____ 6. John and Jesus were related because their mothers were cousins.

WHO?

- 1. John came in the spirit and power of the prophet _____.
- 2. _____ had foretold that God would set up His everlasting kingdom while the Jews were in bondage to the Romans.
- 3. John's father was a priest named _____.
- 4. Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River by _____.
- 5. The coming of Christ was a great and notable day for _____ who obey Jesus' gospel.

SCRIPTURE SEARCH

- 1. John's food in the wilderness was _____ and wild _____ (Mark 1:6).
- 2. When the Pharisees and Sadducees (Jewish religious leaders) came out to hear John preach, John called them a generation of _____ (Matthew 3:7).
- 3. Jesus was sinless but told John He wanted to be baptized to "_____ all _____" (Matthew 3:15).
- 4. John's message to the people was basically, "_____ ye; for the _____ of _____ is at hand" (Matthew 3:2).

POINTS TO PONDER

- 1. Who sent John and what was the purpose he was sent?
- 2. What is the purpose of our baptism? (Acts 2:38; 22:16; Romans 6:4, 5).
- 3. Why had God allowed heathen nations to subdue and rule over His people Israel (the Jews)?
- 4. What will happen on the judgment day to those who refuse to believe and obey Jesus?